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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to survey alternative schools to determine what their English programs are like, what kinds of problems and successes have been encountered by their English teachers, and what suggestions they have for others who encounter similar problems. Questionnaires were sent to administrators and English teachers in a number of alternative schools selected at random. Analysis of the findings indicated that respondents perceive their English programs as being in line with current educational trends toward individualized, yet humanistic, education, with emphasis on the development of skills. Respondents reported problems involving development, selection, or procurement of materials, recruitment of appropriate teachers, and skills development. Suggestions for meeting such problems emphasized a need for planning and preparation time. Many respondents attributed their successes to the cooperation of administrators, teachers, and students, who work in a Program to which they are firmly committed. These respondents recommend that schools implementing new English programs provide systematic programs of staff development and curriculum development. (GW)

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# IMPLEMENTING ENGLISH PROGRAMS IN ALTERNATIVE SCHOOLS*

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## Abstract

Rationale. Increasing numbers of alternative schools are being opened in this country every year. An investigation of problems encountered in implementing the English programs in existing alternative schools could benefit those who are just beginning their efforts.

Problem. What are English programs like in those schools? What kinds of problems are being encountered by their English teachers? What successes have been reported? Do persons who have experienced this process have suggestions which might be helpful to the rest of us?

Findings. A majority of respondents described their English programs as individualized, student centered, humanistic, and personalized. The most frequently mentioned problem was the development and/or selection and procurement of materials, and the second greatest problem was recruitment of teachers appropriate to the instructional setting. The most frequently mentioned suggestions for others dealing with such problems was time for planning and preparation. Strongly and personally committed staff contributed most to success of programs. Suggestions to others desiring to build successful programs centered around program development.

Conclusions. Alternative school English programs are in line with current educational trends toward individualized, yet humanistic education, with emphasis on development of skills. Problems common to many schools involve instructional materials, teachers, and skills development. Administrators and teachers recommend that schools implementing new English programs provide systematic programs, staff development, and curriculum development.

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*Presented to a section meeting at the 1976 convention of the National Council of Teachers of English in Chicago.

# IMPLEMENTING ENGLISH PROGRAMS IN ALTERNATIVE SCHOOLS*

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A Fall, 1976, national survey of alternative schools revealed that both administrators and teachers use such terms as individualized, humanistic, and skills centered to describe their English programs. Because strong and personally committed staff contributed so much to the success of their programs, they recommend systematic staff development and curriculum development programs.

## Background

Alternatives to conventional public schools have been around for a long, long time. In the past, students legitimately quit school to work on farms or at other occupations, learned through apprenticeships or on-the-job training, and attended private, parochial, or trade schools. In fact, there were perhaps more alternatives for students 100 years ago than there are today.

Most such alternatives disappeared, however, with the implementation of compulsory school legislation. Public schools were then faced with the challenge of providing alternatives within their systems. Since the general public was slow to realize this need, providing alternatives for students seemed impossible for a time. In keeping with the nation's belief in individualism, however, many communities began to propose alternative schools as a complement to conventional schools; during the past decade, this

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has resulted in national education organizations suggesting that the nation's schools should provide meaningful educational options for all students and in the governments providing monies (Title III) designated for this purpose.

The alternative school does not replace the conventional school; rather, it joins it. Differences between the schools may not be significant in some cases, but options keep people happy. Differences within a single community are usually greater than differences from one community to another with regard to their social, political, economical, and philosophical value, and schools can reconcile these basic differences through the involvement of the community in the school. This involvement is reflected back into the community; and there is increased commitment on the part of the student, parents, and teachers to what is chosen rather than compulsory.

Problem

As increasing numbers of school systems have established alternative schools, designing and implementing English programs for them has been a real challenge. What are English programs like in those schools? What kinds of problems are being encountered by English teachers? What successes have been reported? Do persons who have been through this process have suggestions which might be helpful to others?

Procedure

The authors randomly selected a number of alternative schools from a list supplied by National Alternative Schools Program and sent questionnaires to their administrators and English teachers in an effort to answer the above questions.

Findings

What kinds of English programs have been implemented in alternative schools? We asked teachers and administrators to

indicate words which would describe their English programs. A majority of them indicated that the following adjectives are descriptive of their programs (most frequently used words appear first): individualized, student centered, humanistic, personalized, enjoyable, innovative, multi-media, exciting, and skills centered. A lesser number described their programs as varied, basic, good, subject centered, traditional, worthwhile, meaningful, and basic plus.

In response to: State the most serious problem you faced in implementing your current English program, by far the largest number of teachers and administrators indicated development and/or selection and procurement of suitable instructional materials. The second problem most frequently stated by administrators was locating teachers with competencies appropriate to the instructional setting and/or assisting teachers in gaining such competencies. Another problem frequently stated by responding teachers was skills development, particularly in reading and writing. Other problems identified dealt with such concerns as scheduling, class size, money, and equipment.

On being asked for Suggestions for others who encounter similar problems, respondents offered specific suggestions. In the area of instructional materials, they emphasized the necessity for adequate planning and preparation time. Recommendations ranged from beginning at least one year prior to school opening with persons trained in curriculum writing to providing time and opportunity for teachers to work closely with language arts consultants and to visit with other teachers who had successfully implemented such programs. Some mentioned the necessity for ordering a wide range of materials. Others proposed development of mini-courses and a blending of the semi-traditional and the choice-centered curriculum. Several stressed the necessity for student involvement in development and field testing of

materials. One teacher reminded us that success does not come instantly.

In response to the question, In your opinion, what has contributed most to the success of your program? most respondents stated staff--teachers and administrators who were strongly and personally committed to the program. Of these respondents, administrators listed teachers or staff while teachers listed administrative support. Second in frequency were responses having to do with open student/teacher relationships and student assumption of responsibility for learning. Other items mentioned were program, flexibility, competency based program, and parental support.

In response to What suggestions would you make to others to assist them in building successful programs? most answers centered around program development. Typical responses follow:

Innovative and humanistic teachers are a must.

Curriculum materials must be carefully selected and/or made and utilized.

The program should constantly be evaluated and revised accordingly.

Student input is essential.

Teachers and administrators need to develop a rationale/conceptual model from which to work. Instruction and materials must be consistent with the rationale/model. Interdisciplinary approach to this initial step is quite beneficial.

See the program as part of an entire program. Develop goals/objectives. Develop a staff team. Integrate program so that main track can benefit from exploratory steps taken.

The suggestions should come from the classroom teachers working with the principal. Successful programs begin with the teachers with help from the principal.

Competency based program omits fear of failure.

Work closely with language arts/reading consultants. Visit teachers in other programs and discuss how they tackled problems.

## Conclusions

Alternative school English programs are in line with current educational trends toward individualized, yet humanistic education, with emphasis on development of skills. Problems common to many schools involve instructional materials, teachers, and skills development. Administrators and teachers recommend that schools implementing new English programs provide systematic programs/staff development and curriculum development.

## Summary and Discussion

It appears to the writers that teachers and administrators who responded to the questionnaire perceive their English programs as being in line with current educational trends toward individualized yet personalized or humanistic instruction--perhaps even what has been labelled confluent education. Respondents reported problems which are common to many schools--with particular emphasis on instructional materials, teachers, and skills development. Suggestions for meeting these problems emphasized a need for planning and preparation time. Many of them attribute their success to administrators, teachers, and students working in harmony in a program to which they are firmly committed. Their suggestions to others desiring to build successful programs centered around program development.

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